

House Bill 140
January 27, 2015
Presented by M. Jeff Hagener
House Fish, Wildlife & Parks Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Jeff Hagener, Director for the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), and I rise in support of House Bill 140.

The last general resident hunting and fishing license fee increase was in 2005. I was the Director then, and I told the Legislature that that increase would fund the department through approximately 2015. That's our budget model – for the last half-century the department has come to the Legislature about once per decade seeking a fee increase. So it is not a surprise that I'm standing here before you today.

What is a surprise is that we weren't standing here sooner. With the economic decline in 2008, we experienced a \$2.5 million decline in nonresident license sales over two years. Simultaneously, we had a couple of harsh winters that dramatically affected deer and antelope populations, particularly in eastern Montana. As a result of those population die-offs, we have eliminated 50,000 deer B tags and 24,000 antelope licenses since 2010, further reducing revenue. Then there was the flood year, where we had a 9% decline in fishing license sales. At the same time we were losing revenue, our costs of doing business – such as employees' health care, gasoline and utilities -- continued to increase.

When I returned as Director in 2013, I made \$1.4 million in permanent budget cuts and shifted \$1.4 million of general license expenditures to federal funding. These decisions enabled the department to present the 2015 Legislature with a balanced budget for the FY 16/17 Biennium and with an ending fund balance in the General License Account that's adequate to provide the cash flow needed to pay bills. We've been frugal and responsible managers of hunter and angler license dollars.

When you think about FWP, I'm sure you think about wolves, bison, sage grouse, grizzly bears and land acquisitions – all the things that are on the front page of the paper and generate controversy. (As a side note, you need to know that land acquisitions are funded by an earmarked funding source that by state statute I can only spend on habitat conservation.) While these things can't be ignored, what drives FWP is hunting and fishing and meeting the expectations of hunters, anglers and landowners. If we are going to maintain the hunting and fishing that we have today, and continue our important work with landowners who play such a vital role in fish and wildlife conservation, then we need you to pass HB 140. We aren't seeking anything exorbitant. The request is modest and we make it with respect for the work you have ahead. The average resident angler will pay \$3 more to fish and \$8 more to hunt, just enough funding to sustain current department programs – without growth –through FY 21.

The alternative to passing HB 140 is budget cuts to general-license funded programs. As you can see from the "FWP Budget 101" information Sue Daly handed out, general license funded programs include: game wardens, shooting range grants, game damage assistance to landowners,

HB 140
Hagener
(6)

information and education efforts, the administration of hunting and fishing license sales – and the \$1 of state match for every \$3 of federal funding that funds fish and wildlife biologists and fish hatcheries.

Another option is to propose legislation to de-earmark the funding for programs such as Block Management, Habitat Montana and the Upland Game Bird Enhancement program and redirect that funding to the general license account.

I recognize that these are not simple or easy choices. And each one has consequences to hunters and anglers, landowners, guides and outfitters and the small businesses that rely upon the over \$1 billion of direct expenditures made annually by hunters and anglers in Montana. From where I sit, the \$3/\$8 solution proposed by HB 140 is a good one and one that I hope you can support. But this decision is yours to make, not mine, and I will implement what you decide.